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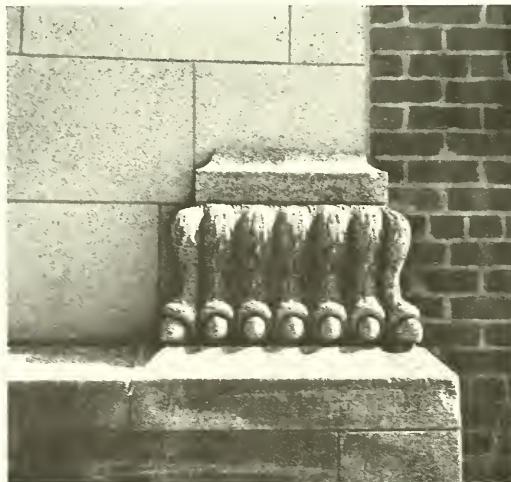
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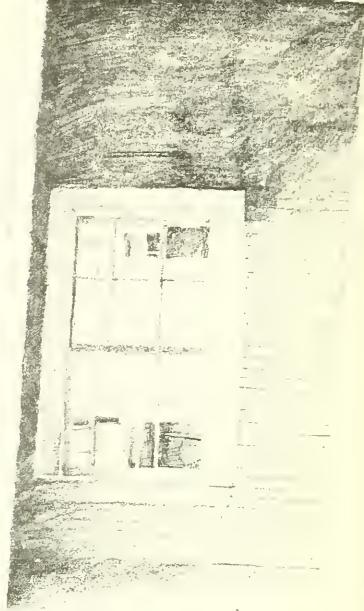
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Flinging piety at the children
She comes,
Stiffly moving into the vacuum of evaporated laughter
Clacking her brown seed rosary,
Hypnotizing the shuffling feet
Ticking down the pulses to the beat of the swinging crucifix.
Two by two behind her in a line they march
Follow the swaying veil, the dromedary walk
Step by step—a long way to the church.
She turns to chide the gigglers gently
(As the Virgin Mary might)
Yet from buried lairs behind her eyes
Something bolts to the surface
As she stares the silence through them.
Through the doors they tiptoe, swallowed by the sacred air,
Approaching the forgiveness box
To tell with faltering contrition
Premature sins scraped from unwillingness.
And now her turn has come.
Her mind trembling fertile with stylized sins
Climaxes in the darkness of contrition
In the caress of forgiving words.
Languidly she sits and cannot conceive
Of children leaping so soon from release to light.
On the high altar, Jesus bleeds reflected sunlight;
Outside, shouting their ways home, the children run.
Only she stays yet still cannot conceive
Anything but a bastard.

—Pam Durban



MARY'S DAY

by Pat Brooks

Morning comes early to the hills where few men live, there where rocks grow in deep grass. The sun rises, light yellow, warm, golden on dafodills.

A tall woman with a turquoise scarf calls out "Mary. Oh, Mary where are you?" her voice clear as rocks dropped in cold water. "Come pick flowers with me Mary." From behind a tree the child comes, her hair brown like her mother's but not so dark, so long, so rich with its blue-green scarf. "Look at all the flowers Mary, aren't they pretty?" Dark eyes with no termination. "Daisies Mary, can you say daisy?"

"Day-see."

"That's right! Daisy! Aren't you a big girl though?" dark hair falling she bends down to her daughter.

They pick daisies and dafodills to sell the next day in town. Mary learns the names of the flowers. Later, under the tree new green with April, her mother, "Oh isn't it beautiful," her voice softly tired, her hair tangled with green leaves. She gathers her Mary onto herself, rocking back and forth in the early dampness, quiet and low singing, "And we'll all go together, to pick wild mountain thyme. Will you go Lassie? Go!"

Years later, an old woman bent under her yellow-gray hair, Mary remembered the daisies. Patches of yellow undulating with her mother's breath, breast rising up and down with the song "Will you go Lassie? Go!", Mary remembered the daisies.

This day was cold, death cold, snow on the mountain. For years now Mary stayed in bed on days like this. She had ceased to notice its hardness. Even her stomach in this last year left her alone; it no longer called for food, and she was free to eat or not as was easiest. Only the cold bothered her any more. This would be an excellent day to stay in bed. With vague regret she rolled herself out of bed and warm bed-clothes. Old-withered naked, she bent thinking of the day ahead as she stepped into her clothes of no color.

She knew. Before she had even been fully awake she had known. Lying motionless in bed, waking from her dream of daisies, she knew. It was the snow, and the cold, and the sticky taste in her mouth. But mostly she just knew, and had no doubt; today she would die.

"Old stove, this is your last day," voice of no tone. "So be hot and have bright colors and lots of noise," sad almost for the stove. "Nobody will use you again." moving

away to the chair, then turning back "you've been a good stove for an old woman." A step towards the chair, "I've been grateful." No steps, she stood and "it's been your fire that's kept me warm." Old tears in once-brown eyes, walking back to the stove, "Well, you'll be sad to see me go." Looking at its black face, "I've made the fires in you." Then a sigh and no tears, "but don't mourn stove. You've kept me warm."

She went on her work. All her few clothes she washed and hung by the stove and folded and put away each in its new-cleaned drawer. And the walls she washed and floor scrubbed to whiteness. One she had been young and wanted death to know her now as boys know young girls with red-flushed cheeks . . .

She had been young once and supple, with strong legs running over the hills in early morning, with Harry Dean running over the hills. "Mary" he said, his voice tight and faltering, standing under the tree where they always parted, standing not wanting to go, "Mary, I like your hair down like that," swallowing hard, trying to wet his mouth "it's awfully pretty like that." Going on without volition, blindly repeating aloud what he had said to himself a thousand times. "Would you put this in your hair?" a wilted, palm-hot daisy, drooping in his clutched hand.

And other days running on in sun-glorious succession. At the end of summer under the tree, one evening, "Mary, I think you are very pretty. I've, I've, Mary" young Harry with dark green eyes "Mary I've never kissed a girl before," looking into her eyes "may I kiss you Mary" young Harry with yellow hair. "Mary?" young Harry Dean she wanted to marry.

But sent off to the war instead. She sent him off with kisses and tears—and with smiles and secret joy; with anguish of parting, and silent thrill of glory—smell of firecracker joy, and hot dogs, politicians with round voices, sun-flag pride of young men. Letters came with words manly strong, growth of war, fruits of desolation dimming sun-pride. And then nothing. Harry was killed and it was over, never to come again. And never again her Harry, her Harry she loved. Under their tree she cried her store of tears. Then wept without tears, without noise, without even pain, but in emptiness.

April had come again with its joy. She sang and danced and her eyes laughed again. But always self-hidden was a half-sorrow for the world that would never be the same. There where had been joy and glory, there where

men did valient deeds and won honor, there would never grow again a secret joy.

As always red and orange had come with September, and wild winds making colorflakes of the leaves. Her mother now aged-cold, wanting the heat of the town, Mary left the old house and moved to Bradock street to teach school. She had to stay for spring and so she stayed for summer, and another winter, and another. On the long summer nights of crickets' song she and Beth Hendrick sat talking in the yard. Saturdays they went together to the barn dance and Sundays sang in the choir. All in all it was a relief when her mother's death took her back to the old house on the hill. She could use the freedom which had lain unseen. In the spring were the daisies; on her porch rocking slowly back and forth she could watch the wind blow in April over the yellow field and the new greenness of the one tree.

Now this day was cold, death cold, and her strength gone for good. The room was washed and clean, new coal in the stove. As on a wave she rocked, think nothing, seeing nothing. Now at the last only waiting. Unjointed pictures merged past and far past and present and future till time became a figment and dreams reality. Five years ago came again present—

A flood of people, all strangeness in their new clothes and young faces. A man's voice, raspy, "Mary Lawson this here house is a disgrace to the town. It don't matter if it is outside the city limits. People come through town and right by here and say to themselves—"Martinsburg sure is a run-down kind of town.'" Another voice in the sea, a corpulent man, "It ain't right you living out here when we all know you got plenty a money and don't have to live so low." A woman's voice, but hard, not like her

mother's voice, "one of these days youra gonna kill yourself here and noboy'll even so much as know you died. Youra gonna have to go down to Silzer City where they take care of people like you." All of them coming at once, crowding her, saying these things about going away. The women especially frightened her. Porcellan-painted smiles, dressed in extravaganza such as girls only dream of for their dolls they came on, up on the porch, these women whose words could never sing as her mother's had, on her porch. And why? They didn't understand; they couldn't mean what they said. Why should she move? And the young men, one with yellow hair; but he wanted her to move too. And they kept talking and making no sense and they wouldn't listen and they couldn't understand and she ran into the house at last and got her father's old gun, her father whom she could never remember and knew only by his name and her mother's stories sometimes late at night when she used to think she heard her mother cry, her father's gun that hadn't been used since he died. She took it out and told them to all go away and leave her alone. And they left.

Now after five years she could laugh thinking of how they all ran from such an old woman. "Don't have the sense to know I most likely couldn't shoot 'em if I wanted." She chuckled softly a half-laugh still mixed with dread. It was good one time to have stood up and not to have moved and to see them going back down the hill. Yes, for one time it was good. Five years she had pondered, asking herself if she would have shot at them at last? It was good she had not had to find out that day. It was good they never came back.

Her thoughts came in widely separated pictures, in sights and sounds and smells, and mostly in daisies of her mother and Harry and ripe fruit falling. "And we'll all go together, to pick wild mountain thyme. Will you go Lassic? Go!"

DISTORTION

Bells sound,
Chilling the city with night,
Raw in its rush of purple shadows.

They talk of the purple shadows
With their eyes of smoked glass,
The night people in night places.
They see their love
In blue bottles cool and dark,
And love, they made warm
In the candescence
Of the purple shadows
That become their
Soft red songs of love.

We were together
Knowing the dark purple wines
In blue bottles
That were warm silent songs
For we touched with our eyes,
Without the hushed red words.

The night people become our shadows:
We hid in their nearness,
In sheer glass chills,
Our only words,
The bells,
Frail crust of night.

—Janet Fite

RAIL WALKING

Standing in the ditch has tired my feet
(Ankles really) so I cannot walk the rail.
The track runs past the laundry, and to
The smell of starch and big hot irons, I
Balanced nearly the length of the backyard.
One foot and then the next upon the slick,
Striated band. One hand spread out and one
Arm crooked. Don't think of itches or
Assymetry—one mental wobble and you're back
To cross-ties. But you can't dismiss
As wavering a diesel screaming down,
Its light blaring in March sun. I climbed,
As if unbulled, off the rail, into the brambled
Ditch between laundry and track and would
Not move. Stood there, holding a blackberry
Wire where it had no barbs and watched
The axles tumble past below refrigerators and
Hobbled truck-trailers. (Each wheel-set makes
A different sound.) I thought to threaten me
They might roll off, fall, and grind my bones,
Roll me back to dust. But the caboose
Swung by. I waved, remounted my track.
But feet are fit now for no more than cross-
Tie, tripping steps, although the rail is not
Hot, as I thought. Starch and heated irons
Fill with smell the vacuum left by
Violent motion. Before the train is gone
From sight, it is no more heard than clocks.

—Susan Settemyre



PROSPERO

—Roberta Engleman

Twenty-five years ago our town was busy with the War, and all the frivolous, useless men my father knew were dead. They were alive during the thirties—at the tail end of their lives, surely, but alive all the same. Most of them belonged to the semi-village-idiot category, but two of them were men you might know. One of them came to town for the same reason that drew most of the stranger elements—tuberculosis. Our town was wonderful for curing tuberculosis, when that was fashionable. That was the first time. The last time he brought his wife and put her in a sanitorium. The other man was home born and bred—a great giant man who kept coming back home again, all for saying he never could. When they were dead and I was grown my father used to talk about all of them, the last two no more than the others.

Here is what happened: Home in the depression was like everywhere else. It was hard to get a job. My father, whom I shall call Bill, was a student first; afterwards he learned to paint signs, first on windows, where you could wipe it off and start over, and later on paper. A man named Moony taught him when he came home from college occupation-less. Moony had come to the trade not out of any particular love of it himself. He had been an artist on the flying trapeze—Circus Man Moony. One day Circus Man missed the man who was catching him and flew right out into the grandstands. In the aftermath of physical examinations he was found to have tuberculosis, and after that he immigrated to the mountains to become a sign painter. Nobody knew why he picked sign painting. His life was just one big non-sequitur. Logical or not, Moony had a year's head start on my father, and he taught him his graphic letters. They worked in a shop on the north side of town. It was owned by a man named Eisen, who was a god sign painter and the proprietor of the most Bohemian joint in an otherwise sane little town. There were no artists' garrets in a town where people who caught lung diseases came to get well, so a sign-painter's shop had to do. The habitues of the shop were, besides Eisen, an English lord who married an American heiress who lived in a monstrous castle outside town; and an ex-minstrel show man whose wife was a lady lion tamer. These gentlemen enjoyed the comforts of the Snake Room,

a small apartment at the back of the shop. It was named after the imaginary furnishings, which the lord and the minstrel furnished themselves while suffering D.T.'s.

The latter two did no sign work. Moony graduated from windows to small cards when my father came. Moony's work was very distinctive:

SOX
HURRY WHILE THEY LAST
S-I-L-K
\$1.00 a pr. 89¢ a pr.
signs by
CIRCUS MAN Moony

All this in varigated colors. Bill did the leg work, making the circuit of the grocery stores and painting the day's specials all over the windows. He did this for a month or so before Moony went on a spell of occupying the Snake Room, and then he was promoted to cards. One day when he came to work Moony was already there in deep conference with a customer. The customer was the biggest, broadest, most unbrushed Bohemian Bill had seen up to this point, and he nodded most politely when he left.

"Who was that?" Bill asked.

Moony trounced his brush up and down in some solvent as if he were going to work that day. "You mean you don't know who that was?"

"Well right off hand, it looked like Tom West."

Moony wilted, but he soon recovered. "He's a friend of mine. We met in New York."

"Oh. Is he here to stay?"

Moony puffed himself up. "He might write his next novel here."

"Oh."

"Aren't you excited?"

"Sure. My great Aunt Jessie will have a conniption.





She swears she's in the first book and that he said horrible things about her."

"Really?"

"She carried on so much that Mamma wrote him and asked him if she was. He wrote back from New York and said no, but when we showed the letter to Aunt Jes she took to her bed and wouldn't get up again until we all said we thought he was lying. Aunt Jes is 92. I think that's what keeps her alive."

Moony, not sure how much of this to believe, got up and chinned himself on the bar that he had hung in the middle of the shop. "He came to see his mother."

Bill glanced mischievously at the Snake Room and said, "How is she?"

"He wanted to talk about the circus." Moony's non sequiturs were going strong now. He tried to hang by his knees from the bar and fell on his head. Eisen, who was in the corner painting the smile on a soft drink girl, got up and picked him up. He put the brush back in Moony's hand. "Today you paint," he said.

The returning prophet stayed in his native town for quite a while. He did not write in his town, only about it, and he kept apart from it for purposes of observation, living in a cabin in the woods above town. He was regarded with caution for a while, and when it was discovered that he did not bite and only looked mad, the town hedged up to him and began to ask him to write testimonials for department stores and showed him other signs of its affection. He spent one or two afternoons a week in Eisen's. It was not unusual that he should gravitate to the shop. Lord Burgel and the minstrel, who lived in a hearse parked around the corner, were generally there furnishing entertainment, a combination of British music hall and Dockstader's Minstrels.

"I've so ugly," the minstrel would say, "that they used to throw a tarpolin over the car I rode in so's nobody would shoot me." Lord Burgel would commiserate, and Tom West would agree that the minstrel was quite ugly. And then they would all go into a corner of his vast mind for future use, Bill thought. He wondered against his better instincts if he were in there too. The giant payed no special attention to him. He seemed to know Moony better than anyone. One day Moony confided in Bill, having no one else handy to confide in, "We're going to write a novel together."

"Oh?"

"Yes, soon. Tom isn't writing now, you know."

"No I didn't. Is it about the circus?"

"Well—it might have the circus in it. I imagine he'll leave that up to me. It's hard to explain if you haven't been in on it from the beginning. It's about home too."

"The Return of the Native."

"Say, that's a good title."

"Don't mention it."

"It's going to be very profound."

"You mean it's going to be about life."

Moony looked enlightened. "Yeah. Life."

developed a standard line about the situation: They were going to collaborate on a novel about the circus, but they couldn't stay sober long enough. It was a harmless enough line. Moony and the giant drank, but they were amiable. The Snake Room generally had other occupants. The drinking was progressing better than the writing, of course, but neither of them cared, and neither did Eisen, as long as Moony painted. This went on for a while, and the giant began to make noises about going back to New York.

One morning Bill was alone in the shop painting a poster—Two Day Special on Potatoes. 5 lb. for 12¢. Reg. 15¢. He was laboring over getting the last number on the line about the time a smallish blond man came in looking for Tom West.

"He'll be in in the afternoon," said Bill, looking closely and wondering if the man was who he thought.

The man looked disappointed.

"I can show you how to get to where he lives."

"I'll come back," he said politely. He started to go, pausing at the door. "Ah—is the library still on the square?" He blinked his eyes at the white building across the street as if his head hurt.

"Sure is."

"Thanks."

A half hour and two potato posters later the man was back. "It's a damn shame," he said with no introductory remarks, sitting down and scratching his head.

"What is?" asked Bill, who was still alone.

"Do you know—" The man leaned forward and pointed at Bill. "Do you know there is not a single book by Thomas West in that library."

"I'm not surprised."

"What's the matter with you people?"

Bill smiled awkwardly and shrugged. The man said something apologetic and left. A week or so later the word was out, F. G. Francis the author was back in town, this time with his wife, who was in a sanitorium, and the first thing he had done was to order copies of all the works of Thomas West and present them to the local library.

Bill did not see Francis until a week later. He came in one afternoon while Moony and the minstrel were swapping tall tales for West's benefit. When Francis stood beside West he was dwarfed. The two men spoke softly, laughed together, and went off without saying goodbye. Moony and the Minstrel lost interest in their act, and Moony went back to painting. The minstrel wandered back to the Snake Room and fell asleep. Eisen sighed and said, "Now we're going to get some more work done around here."

Neither West nor Francis came around the shop for a few days. Without West the atmosphere was duller. Lord Burgel and the minstrel had a slight run-in with the police, who towed their hearse away, and they were forced to relocate. Finally they settled on an empty lot, and Burgel, one of whose ancestors had been a finance minister to Elizabeth I, suggested they open a parking lot. Their mutual business adventure held the shop's attention for a few days, but that dwindled, and tedium set in again.

On a Monday afternoon, not long after lunch, West returned alone. Moony and the minstrel sent up a cheer, and Lord Burgel raised a finger. West was craning his neck around while he was saying hello.

"Are you looking for somebody?" asked Eisen.

West frowned. "I guess he's not here." He sat down on a crate and lifted his hand, like the lord of misrule. Eisen looked gloomily at Bill. An hour or so later Moony was recounting with considerable gusto how Lord Burgel had once undertaken to play Santa Claus for a group of orphans, gotten drunk, and fallen out of his wife's spacious chimney on his face. While everyone was howling about this, someone turned the knob from the inside of the Snake Room. Bill took a quick count to see who was missing, but all the usual people were on the outside. He was not surprised when the occupant turned out to be Francis, who smiled politely and walked delicately out without saying a word to anyone.

West slapped his thigh. "All right," he said. "Who went drinking with Francis?"

Moony and the minstrel looked innocent, and West glowered at them.

"If you don't mind my saying it," Burgel pointed out, "he doesn't really need anybody at all to drink with. He does nicely on his own."

This was irrefutable, and West had to admit it. He had made the gesture of trying to be good for Francis. All right, he had done that, and it hadn't worked. Bill had the feeling that Francis had just been filed in the back of West's cavernous mind. He might come out again in several months, but not as a testament to anyone's reforming spirit.

Even if West had tried to keep the sign shop away from Francis, he would have had a hard time. It seemed that Francis' brand of hell-raising was infinitely more exquisite than anybody else's—more exciting than the Ringling's Circus or Dockstader's Minstrels or the House of Lords.

"And besides," said Eisen once when he and Bill were alone in the shop, "it's double insurance. If you don't make it into West's next book, Francis is bound to put you in his."

"Do you think you'll make it?"

Eisen snorted.

Francis's revels were more entralling, but they were also more strenuous. There was something frantic about them, and Moony, who was still tubercular, was beginning to tire under the strain. One morning the police came and warned Eisen to keep the noise down, and Bill was beginning to get hints from his mother that he should work somewhere else. But there was something addictive about the shop, no less for Bill, he reluctantly admitted to himself, than to the crowd proper. One afternoon he was forced to break up a fight between Lord Burgel and Moony for the use of the Snake Room. Shortly after that West announced that he was going back to New York. There was a general round of protest which ended with Burgel standing on a chair and reciting, "Our revels now are ended . . ."

No one knew how to finish the speech until Francis came in. He seemed excited, and he was carrying a small mailed package. When he was made to understand the situation he deposited Burgel and recited the speech without hesitating. There was an odd intensity about it that was a bit disturbing. He did not stop with the business of life being rounded by a sleep.

"Bear with my weakness; my old brain is troubled, Be not disturbed with my infirmity;
If you be pleased, retire into my cell—" He waved off in the direction of the Snake Room.

No one laughed.

"And there repose; a turn or two I'll walk,
To still my beating mind."

He got down from the chair and walked to the door. The group was silent.

"Oh—Tom—" He paused at the door. "Here's the book. It came this morning." He tossed West the package he had been gripping. "You look at it. I can't stand to."

West nodded.

"What time are you leaving?"

"At nine in the morning. Express to New York."

Francis nodded back. "Goodbye."

Burgel said, "I didn't know he had a book, West—" West got up and left, pulling the wrapping off the book as he went out.

"Well I'll be damned," said Burgel. "He didn't tell us."

"I think I ought to go mind the hearse," said the minstrel.

"Moony," said Eisen, "I have some work for you."

The following morning Bill came in to work at nine. Eisen was bending and stooping, picking up paint brushes, jars, overturned chairs, anything that was on the floor. One of the drawing boards was tipped on its side, and Moony's swing dangled with one end broken loose. It swayed gently in a little circle.

"Was it a happy brawl?" Bill tipped the drawing board up right.

Eisen reached up and stopped Moony's bar from swaying. "It was pretty ungodly. West came in around seven last night all dressed up. He was going visiting, he didn't say who, he's just dropped by to return Francis's book. Bill, I'd hate to have been Francis—watch out, you're stepping in paint. You'd have thought the world was going to end if West said he didn't like the book."

"Did he?"

"Yeah. I guess he meant it. Maybe he just felt sorry for Francis. The poor man was shaking."

"Why wouldn't he mean it?"

"The book came out in New York a week ago. He had a New York paper, or maybe two. I don't know. Bad reviews. And that bastard Burgel was giving him a bad time about it."

"Is this the book?" Bill picked one up from behind a table.

"That's it. I guess they forgot all about it."

"Why?"

"Well—Francis asked West where he was going. It seems he was going to see Sidney Porter's widow."

"I didn't know she was still alive. He must have died—"

"In 1910. Ask me anything about him. Francis waxed brilliant. He really admires the man, at least when he's drunk. His stories display great skill in narrative—ah—accurate representation of contemporary slang, and Francis

was just dying to go roaring up to his widow and tell her what her husband did wrong in such-and-such a story 45 years ago."

"Did he?"

"Oh, he tried. West was going to talk him out of it, and Moony took West's side. But then Burgel and the minstrel decided they wanted to go."

"Result, brawl."

"Not really. They were just thrashing around."

"Was anybody hurt?" Bill straightened the pages of Francis' book.

"Not that I know. West slipped out when it started, and as soon as they found out he was gone, they went after him. But I don't guess they knew where to go. Anyway I hope not."

"You haven't seen them?"

"Only Francis. He's in the Snake Room. I don't think he ever left."

"There comes Burgel."

His lordship came in and took a look around. He had the grace to look embarrassed.

"Did West get off all right?" Eisen asked.

"Oh yes, oh yes. The minstrel and I saw him off."

"And Moony and Francis?"

"Moony's a bit under the weather. I can't say about Francis. I lost track of him last night. Pity about the man."

"Pity."

"Well, I must see if the Minstrel got back to the hearse. I don't suppose Francis is here."

"He's here."

"Oh well—I suppose I'll see him. Goodbye." Burgel took a good look around and hurried out.

Bill lay the book up on a shelf. "What is there to do this morning?"

"I don't know. I can't seem to find the orders. Help me look."

While they were looking Francis came from the Snake Room. By then most of the mess was picked up, and he looked a little puzzled at the neatness. Bill noticed that he had the book's dust jacket in his hand. He reached up from the shelf and handed Francis the book. Francis rubbed the dirty back with his sleeve and smoothed out the jacket. "Did you read the book?" he asked Bill.

Bill looked up to make sure Francis was talking to him. "I didn't have a chance to read it."

"Oh. Did West leave?"

Eisen said, "He left."

"Nobody's been here yet?"

"Burgel came in."

Francis was still ministering to his book. "West liked the book better than the critics. Last night I told everybody I wasn't going to write any more books. It made them mad." He looked up at Bill and grinned as if this were a good joke on them. Bill grinned back.

"You're almost all picked up now, aren't you. Except for this chair." He turned it upright and climbed on it. It staggered, and Bill steadied it.

"Now my charms are all o'erthrown,
And what strength I have's mine own—"

He stepped down.

"Which is most faint . . . ?"

He took a firm grip on his book and marched out. Eisen literally exploded after he had gone. "So they all found out they weren't going to get in anybody's damn novel!"

"I—ah—I think I see the orders on the floor."

"Well, hand them here. I have a feeling it's going to be very quiet today."

Moony went into a decline and went to Florida, where his old circus payed his bills. Burgel and the minstrel still lived in their hearse, but their parking lot business seemed to get more demanding. Francis stayed in town for a while, not long. A few months after he left, Bill was struck with wanderlust, and he approached Eisen with his plans.

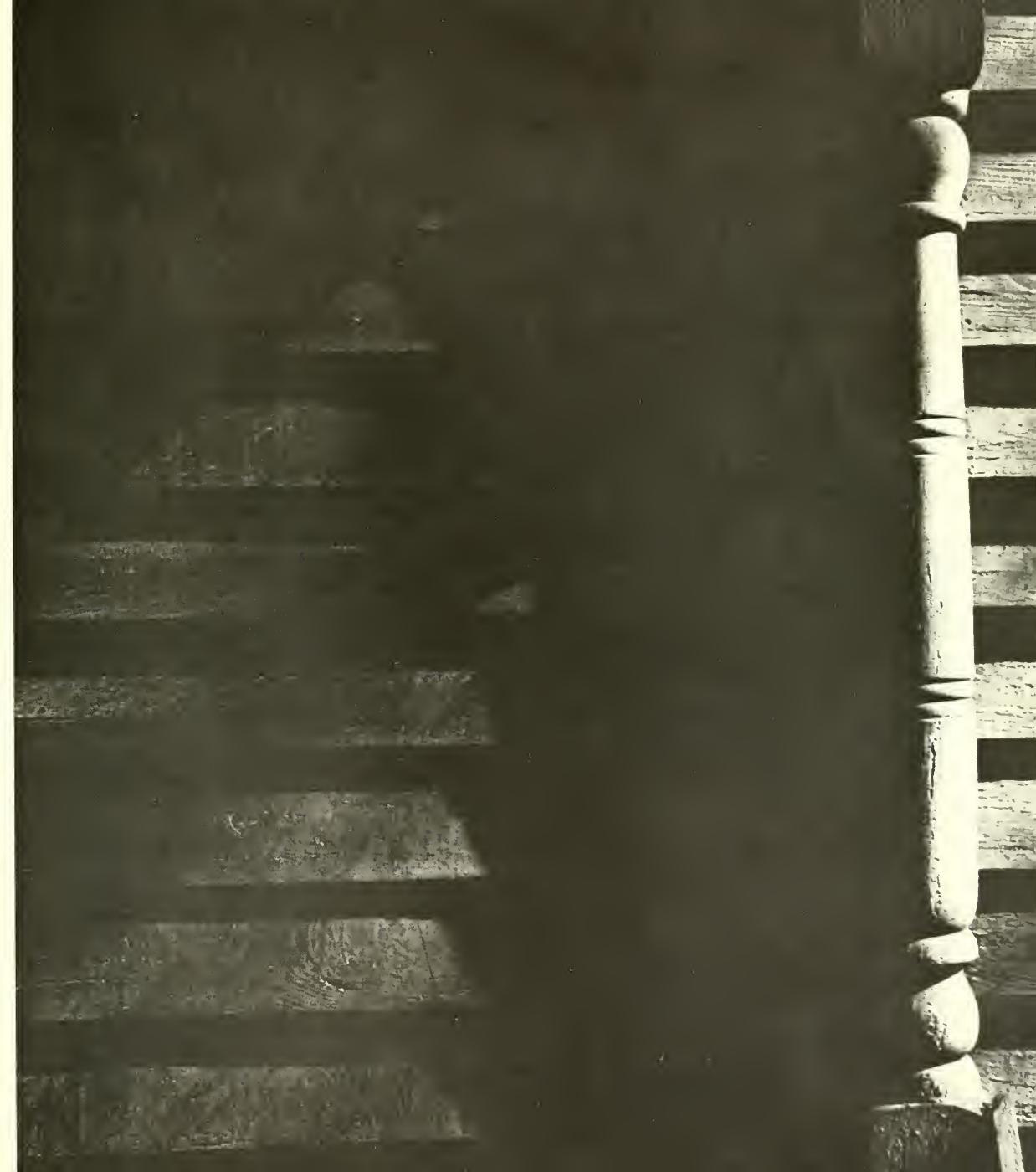
"Don't tell me about the pay being better somewhere else." Eisen said. "It's just too dull around here. You wanted to get yourself in a book too, didn't you?"

Bill was stung. "Well, did you?"

"I put up with them, didn't I? Write, why don't you?"

The wanderlust was not permanent. My father came back, and I grew up not far from the shop. For a long time I never knew much about any of the shop's inmates, except not to go in the minstrel's hearse, which was abandoned. My father never said much about Francis—only that he probably knew more Shakespeare than Tom West. It took me a long time to fathom that, but one day I finally realized what Francis meant.

. . . Now I want
Spirits to enforce, art to enchant;
And my ending is despair
Unless I be relieved by prayer;
Which pierces so, that it assaults
Mercy itself, and frees all faults.
As you from crimes would pardon'd be,
Let your indulgence set me free.



OLD WOMEN

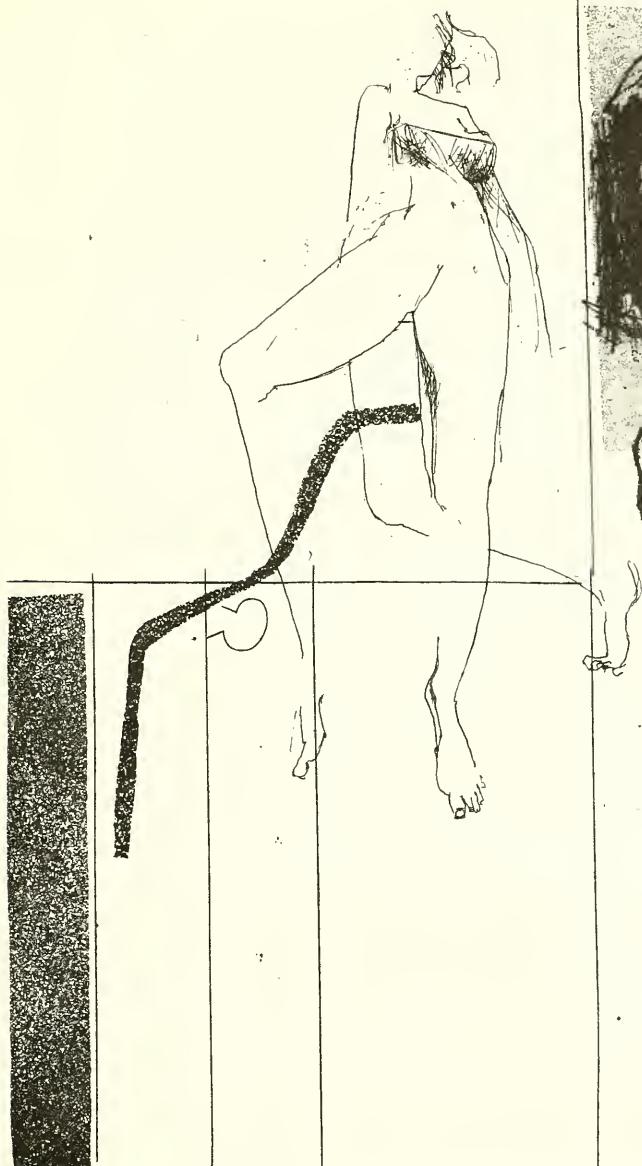


Often I pass by
Old wrinkled women with powdery faces
Lipsticked above the natural line
Who wait forlornly for a friend
To pick them up for the weekly prayer meeting
Where afterwards they talk of lusty youths
Who have gentlemen callers so late
And husbands long since dead
Neighbors who don't prune their bushes
Or let their brood run wildly through the flowers

I might meet walking
Two old ladies, twittering like blue parakeets in cages
Clumping, tapping on stilt legs down the sidewalk
Feet clad in "old ladies runners"
Their knobby knuckled freckled hands
Clutching at oversized handbags
I smile but quickly shy my head
From their malignant stare

My grandmother reads the Bible every day
While her teeth soak in a glass
And talks of days gone by
She nods before the late-late show
I run and jump and sing
But soon I'll dream inside a withered head.

—Linda Nulsen





THE ESOTERIC LEAGUE AND ME

(or The Reason for Joining the Découpage Club)

—Georgia Barnes

The Esoteric League prints a magazine, *The Monthly Miscellany*, which contains the members' selections of the best music, art, prose, and verse submitted that month. They wanted to put architecture in it but decided bricks were too expensive. Believing it to be the pinnacle of aesthetics, I had often enjoyed their charming little journal, but felt that it lacked something. So I decided to join. My application included the serial number of my light meter, my dictionary brand name, the color of my sweat shirt so as to blend aesthetically with those of my fellow members, and my reason for wanting to join. I wrote that I sincerely desired to participate in true aesthetic experiences with intelligent, sensitive, and talented people such as themselves. I was accepted immediately.

My first meeting with the League was scheduled for the second Wednesday of the third month, seven o'clock p.m., until twelve midnight. So, of course, I prepared appropriate wardrobe beforehand—I poured clorox on my torn-off blue jeans, dragged my white tennis shoes through the local playground dirt, dyed a turtle-neck sweater black, and cut off the sleeves of my new black sweater. To prepare further, I didn't wash my hair for a week. The meeting was held in the editor's back room. All the members were arranged in finery similar to mine; so when I arrived I knew I was in the right place. The older members were slouched on the floor, the table, and the desk and the new members were supported by the wall and filing cabinet. After a short, somber greeting about the glories and wonders of art, beauty, and all that by the short, somber editor, the editor taught us new members the motto, "ART, Art, ART" and the secret handshake (left hand grabs the other fellow's left thumb). This always produces a flurry over who grabs the thumb first. At the end of a thoroughly meaningful initiation ceremony, we gave our pledge to pursue the pleasures of true art everywhere.

Finally we had refreshments; refreshments; peanuts, pretzels, potato chips, fritoes, and then applejuice to wet our dehydrated throats. While eating, we discussed the true meaning of art and personal visions of it, such as art as a teacher of morals, art as a game, or art as an escape from boredom. We decided that ugliness is beauty and beauty is ugliness. Then one of the new members suggested that we look over some entries for the next issue. Since it was nearing the aesthetic hour of midnight, we decided that it might be

appropriate. As a starter we discussed a poem about autumn. Most of the members described it as "sentimental" and trite," but I thought it should go in because, after all, everyone has a right to express himself artistically: art must be common in order to say something to the common people. Next we discussed a long poem, "Tin Cans—Peanut Butter," written by a member of the staff. It ran on about chamber music, hot fudge sundaes, and sack-cloth, but after all it's the thought that counts; so I voted for it. The most exciting discussion of the entire meeting was between the editor and one of the new members about a beautiful prose poem, "Blue Mangoes." The editor said that it was one of the most sensitive portrayals of mangoes that she had ever seen. The old members agreed unanimously and most of the new members stood in their corners. One upstart had the audacity to say that blue mangoes are a physical impossibility and that a prose poem is "a lousy art form." Well, that battle raged for at least twenty minutes. It was then discovered that the poem was written by the editor. The forward young dissenter left, never to hurt the editor's feelings again.

Two or three pieces of music had been turned in. We chose "Mucilage Moods" because of its gripping title—and it looked nice on the page, too. One of the member's boy friends was an art major in elementary education at the local technical institute. After surveying his crayon sketches with our light meters to check their density, we decided everything should go in because of the bright colors. Two excellent prose works were chosen—"In, In," an elongated parody of Robert Frost's "Out, Out" and a short story, "Squashes and Cucumbers," a comprehensive, perceptive insight into the life of a lady bug. It had great organic form too. Well, everything was going along fine at the meeting. I had thoroughly enjoyed presenting my ideas on art and I could tell by the number of cigarette butts that they enjoyed hearing me. I considered them the most sensitive, aware group of artists that had ever listened to me. But they made one drastic, irreparable mistake that, ethically, even I, with my great moral flexibility and sense of relativity, could not overlook. They flatly rejected a total art work of illustrations, verse, and prose entitled, "Life is a Collage." Well, I'm sure that I spent an entire day carving out that thing of beauty.; so I took my manuscript and went home. Next time, I'll join the local Découpage Club, or better yet, I'll form my own league of something or other.



LOUISE, AFTER DR. KING'S DEATH

I never felt so much as if the world
Was coming to an end. Last Thursday night
We didn't watch the news, but we were told
By people crying something wasn't right.
I cried, and here right in my face was thrown
Again the hateful need of hating white.
Since having all my children I have grown
Less quick. I have forgotten how to hate
And studied being poor. I should have known
Poor wasn't all we were. But now's too late
To teach me how to burn. I have too much
To lose. I learned too long ago to wait.
Like him, I guess, instead of "take," I touch.
It works, or always did before—but now
That whiteman's bullet's put an end to such
As him and me. They're breaking up the town
With bricks and sticks and guns. They've called the Guard.
"State of emergency" it's called. Sundown,
They make us go indoors, as if their word
Made seven midnight—sun just standing still
And showing that there's nothing to be feared.
I'm not afraid as yet. Just grieved and ill
And waiting, wishing we knew what to do
Next. It's been noisy some, and it's been still,
And it's been like an old-time wake all through
This curfew—silence and the city lights
In place of candles . . . I just wish I knew . . .
There's awful mournfulness in these long nights!

—Susan Settlemyre



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